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ABSTRACT

An original goal of Chicano Studies was to promote improvement of social and economic conditions in the community, with Chicana and Chicano scholars at the forefront of community struggles. Within this perspective, research is problem-based and part of the community action process. Chicano community groups want to work with researchers and scholars who are both culturally competent and well qualified in their field of inquiry. To build trust with a community, researchers need to prove their commitment to community needs. They can do this by making themselves available to meet with community groups and leaders free of charge until funds are available, volunteering to conduct staff training, writing grants for community organizations, or helping staff members and their children gain access to higher education. Many skills of researchers and scholars can be useful to community groups and should be shared with them. A scholar/researcher should be open to learning from the community and avoid a condescending or superior attitude. Humility and willingness to listen are important. Building a partnership with community groups involves adjustment on both sides. Community groups often get frustrated with the time required for data collection. Researchers need to educate the group about the role of research in policy development and social change. (TD)

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"Building Community Linkages: Some Thoughts on Community Based Action Research"

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Paper Presented at the Southern California Chapter of the
National Association of Chicana/o Studies

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Introduction

An original goal of Chicana/o Studies was to promote improvement of social and ecomonic conditions in the community. It was envisioned that Chicana and Chicano scholars were to be at the forefront of community struggles for housing, jobs, education, and health care. Within this perspective, research is problem based and becomes a part of the community action process. The intent of such research is to produce data and information that can be utilized to advocate for social change.

More than ever, community groups need scholars who are competent in their field as well as knowledge and respectful of community conditions, histories and leadership structures. A trend in federal funding is to support community services and initiatives with the requirement that services must be evaluated as a condition of funding. Part of this emphasis comes from various members of Congress who want to better "account" for federal dollars. Thus, federal funding to community

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2

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organizations now requires a full evaluation of how the funding is spent and how the federal dollars improved conditions in the community.

As a result of the new federal approach to program accountability, community groups, federal agencies and foundations want to work with researchers, evaluators and scholars who are culturally competent as well as excellent in their field of inquiry. Most Chicana/o scholars do not receive adequate preparation in graduate school to engage in community based research partnerships. A few Chicana/o Studies scholars, however, have found a way to bridge their discipline with community needs and issues. This paper reviews approximately ten years of practical experience that I have building linkages with community groups and organizations for the purpose of establishing a research/advocacy partnership and agenda. The focus will be on, 1) how to build trust and get known in the community; 2) what are the specific research needs of community groups; 3) how scholars need to adapt their perspectives and skills to community needs; and 4) how community groups need to better understand the role of research in the process of advocacy and social change.

Building Trust and Getting Known: "Para Servirle a Usted"

Communities of color are distrustful of researchers. This is based on a long history of researchers coming into community settings and taking what they need usually to advance their academic careers. Because of this history, community groups are careful to work with individuals who will not exploit them but work with them

for a common cause. Researchers/scholars who want to build community/academic partnerships need to build trust by proving themselves to the community. What I mean by this is that researchers must prove their commitment to community needs by taking concrete actions and steps. For example, researchers should make themselves available to meet with community groups/leaders as often as necessary, "free of charge." That is, we must understand that most community groups do not have the funds to pay for your time and at least initially, this must be how you work together. I have found that this goes a long way towards building trust because you are offering your time for the good of the organization or community and community groups appreciate your availability. Later, when funds are available or when you have co-authored a successful grant, you can include a stipend or salary for your future work with the project.

Other trust building tools are volunteering to conduct staff trainings, writing grants for community based organizations, or simply helping individual staff members and their children to gain access to higher education. I have found that when you take these type of steps to build trust, soon through word of mouth, you become known as someone to be trusted and someone who can work in collaboration with community groups.

Research Skills Needs of Community Groups

Many Chicana/o Studies scholars do not know how their education and knowledge can be useful to community groups. Often, we are trained in methods,

philosophies or paradigms that have little relevance to issues or problems confronting community groups and thus we cannot build a link between our knowledge and the needs of the community even if we want to do so. I have learned that even though our discipline may be too removed from the specific needs of communities, there are many general skills that we gain as a result of our training that are very useful to community groups. Some of these are:

- analytical skills
- writing skills
- computer skills
- teaching skills
- cultural and linguistic skills
- evaluation skills
- interviewing & observational skills
- grantwriting skills
- public speaking skills

I have used many of the above skills in working with community groups for various projects or initiatives. For example, in 1998, I worked with the Los Angeles County Alcohol, Tobacco, & Drug Policy Coalition chaired by Bill Gallegos. This coalition came together to develop a city and county ordinance to restrict alcohol and tobacco advertising in low-income residential areas of the City and County of Los Angeles. During that year Bill organized youth, families, and community groups around this issue and I testified about the research findings on the effects of advertising on youth behavior and attitudes before the Los Angeles County Planning Commission. Both ordinances passed.

Other skills I often use when working with community groups are grantwriting and more recently program evaluation skills.

Adapting Scholarship and Process

University scholars/researchers need to adjust their attitudes and perspectives when working with community groups in order to build a successful partnership. Often there is a tension between the needs of the researcher to follow a strict timeline or research protocol and the need for community groups and organizations to be responsive to community and organizational needs. Because community organizations are serving a community that has many and often immediate needs, the researcher's timelines and perspectives may need to be modified. A scholar/researcher wanting to build partnerships with community organizations needs to be open to learning from the community setting and thus not come into that environment with an attitude that is condescending or superior. In fact, a lot of humility and willingness to listen is often very useful. In addition, once you let people know that you are flexible and willing to modify your approach to some extent, then you need to show them that you are competent and can take charge of the research process.

Community Groups Need to Understand the Role of Research

Part of building a partnership with community groups involves adjustment and adaptation on both sides. Often, community groups or staff in community organizations get frustrated with the data collection process and with the researcher.

They find that the research slows down their ability to meet the immediate needs of individuals and families and just, "gets in the way." Thus, a university scholar/ researcher who wants to build research partnerships with community groups needs to do quite a bit of training and education about the role of research and data in policy development, advocacy and social change. Once staff understand the important role of outcome or demographic data in the pursuit of policy changes or future funding, they work better with the researcher.